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Religulous

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Religulous

Abstract

This is a review of *Religulous* (2008).

Bill Maher's new movie, *Religulous*, is basically a mockumentary. It's a movie that makes fun of, mocks, people who hold particular religious beliefs. The point of mocking people who hold beliefs is to claim or pronounce that those ideas are bad things. Will those who are mocked change their beliefs? It's very unlikely. Will those who agree with Bill Maher better understand religion? It's not likely. This means that *Religulous* is an insult to many believers and a bit of entertainment for those who agree with Bill Maher.

There are two basic messages in the film. The first is that many bad things are done in the name of religion. On this there is considerable agreement among even people who are religious. Even if they do not see their own religion as having harmful consequences, believers often see other religions as having very bad consequences. There may be some people who deny that any religion can lead to harmful behavior, but for most believers history provides sufficient examples of such behavior that there is no way to ignore this truth. The basic idea that many bad things have been the result of religion is an idea with which even believers can agree.

It is interesting to see how different people interpret their own religions. In some cases people describe their religion as one of peace, love, and forgiveness. But in other cases, people describe that same religion as one that requires the killing of infidels and others as a result of their not following the right

path. This is a question raised in the movie that really does call for a good deal more discussion in the public sphere. At this moment in time we should be asking often whether or not Islam is a religion of peace or one of violence. The answer to that question will tell us a good deal about how to live in the modern world.

The second basic message of the film is that many people hold religious beliefs without good reason, as a matter of blind faith. Here Maher explores many religious ideas that seem to be ridiculous, that is, believable only as a matter of blind faith. Jonah living inside the belly of a big fish, the virgin birth of Jesus, that man and dinosaurs lived on earth together, and so on get stated by a number of the people interviewed. When Bill Maher asks, "Come on?", the response is usually something like, "That's what I believe." But it is an interesting question about what parts of religion we might believe and what parts we might reject. Why do some people adopt a literal interpretation of scripture and why do others interpret their scriptures in metaphorical terms, taking pains to fit the scripture to the world in which they live? Why do some people adopt part of the religious story and reject other parts. These are questions that arise for those of us interested in better understanding the "culture wars."

Everything in this movie could have been said in an essay. All of the claims and arguments could be presented in written form. But the end product would not have much influence on the reader. The power of film is clearly seen in this film. It

is the visual images, the raised eyebrow, the laugh, the silent pause, and so on that give film a power that the written word can never have. This is not only true for the ideas considered in the movie, but also true for the humor. It is the visual images that make this a funny movie, at least for those who agree with Bill Maher.